



Buck and Bald Wild Herd Management Area White Pine County, Nevada

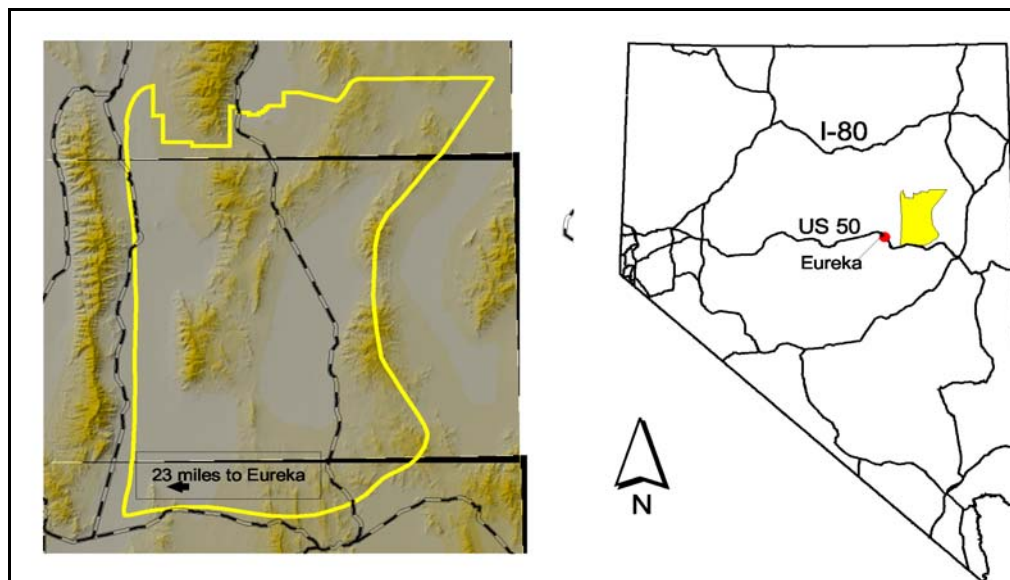


Location/Habitat

The Buck and Bald Herd Management Area (HMA) is located approximately 55 miles north-northwest of the town of Ely, Nevada, in White Pine County. The Buck and Bald HMA comprises approximately 627,030 acres (679 square miles), 98 percent of which is public lands. The area which includes the Buck and Bald HMA is very remote. Access to the HMA is accomplished via dirt roads and trails mainly with two paved roads entering the HMA on the far east and far west sides. The only significant human settlements in the area, aside from a couple of small ranches, are the towns of Ely and Eureka.

The layout of the Buck and Bald HMA consists of four large valleys (Newark, Ruby, Huntington, and Long) bounded on the sides by large mountain ranges and separated in the middle by the south half of the Ruby Mountains. The White Pine/Elko County line is the north end. The mountain ranges include the Butte, South Ruby (Buck and Bald), Maverick Springs, and Diamond mountains. All mountain ranges have peaks exceeding 8,500 feet. Newark Valley is wide and long. Its lowest elevation is around 5,900 feet and is marked by a large alkaline playa or dry lake bed. Long Valley is similar to Newark except it occurs at a slightly higher elevation and is mostly vegetated with only a small playa.

The Buck and Bald HMA affords a classic Great Basin environment marked by extremes of almost every kind. Summertime temperatures can exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and winter lows can fall to 30 degrees below zero or lower. Precipitation in eastern Nevada occurs mostly in the winter in the form of snow with sparse summer moisture. Moisture totals of 12 inches or more are common for the mountains, while less than 8 inches may fall in the valleys.



Water is critical to every animal in the Buck and Bald HMA, because it is very limited and occurs only at very few natural springs and a few man-made wells. There are also a few small perennial streams in the Buck and Bald HMA.

The Buck and Bald HMA is home to numerous wildlife species including mule deer, pronghorn antelope, coyotes, jackrabbits, and numerous species of birds and rodents.

Human interest in the Buck and Bald HMA has been historically limited to livestock ranching, hunting, prospecting, and firewood and pine nut harvesting. In recent years, outdoor tourism has become increasingly important, and eastern Nevada is evolving into an important area for those seeking vast unoccupied expanses of public lands.

Vegetation

Vegetation in the Buck and Bald HMA is also characteristic of the Great Basin with dominant plants having evolved to survive the extremes. Typical vegetation varies according to elevation with the upper mountain slopes generally covered with brush, with fir and mountain mahogany covering extensive areas. Through the mid elevations, pinyon and juniper trees are dominant and often form closed stands which prevent other vegetation from growing. As the elevation and moisture supply falls, the vegetation shifts toward a shrub dominated community. Sagebrush is the most common shrub along the pinyon-juniper perimeter. Sagebrush gives way to white sage, black sage, saltbush and other “salt desert shrub” type plants. Salt desert shrub plants have evolved to deal with the high saline soils which developed after thousands of years of internal drainage of runoff waters.

Herd Description

The Buck and Bald wild horse herd is managed by the Ely Field Office for an appropriate management level of 400 wild horses. This number was developed based on evaluation of the horses’ habitat which indicated that between 340 and 460 wild horses could be sustained in the area without interrupting the delicate balance of the ecosystem. In order to keep wild horse numbers in balance with their environment, the BLM periodically gathers some of these wild horses and places them into the National Wild Horse and Burro Adoption program. Between 1985 and 1999, a total of 2,292 wild horses were removed from the Buck and Bald HMA and a total of 3,020 wild horses were captured.

Wild horses in the area can be found throughout the HMA at different times of the year. Typically, horses will remain at the upper elevations during the summer as long as the forage and water last. As these resources are depleted, or when snow drives them down (as early as September in some years), they move off the mountain and into the valleys. Here they exist on the sparse grasses such as Sandberg bluegrass, needle-and-thread grass, and Indian ricegrass. In addition to grasses, horses in the region have adapted to a diet of dominant shrubs such as white sage and saltbush.

The history of the Buck and Bald wild horse herd is somewhat clouded. Few people visited the area before recent times. The Pony Express trekked through the area, and is likely to have been a major source of horses during its decline. Ranches also no doubt contributed to the wild horse

population during the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s. There may also have been transient horse management for the Army Remount Program which was active into the 1930s. Native Americans in Nevada did not use the horse, and Spanish explorers never found their way into the area.

Due to the probable ancestry of Buck and Bald wild horses, and the rigors of survival in this harsh environment, Buck and Bald wild horses can be very dependable, sturdy riding and packing horses. Average heights vary depending on whether horses were born during drought years or not, but tend to be around 14 to 15 hands. Colors are also variable, but are dominated by the darker black, bay, chestnut, and sorrel colors. Variations on these basic colors are also common, including paint, pinto, palomino, and roan with white markings occurring on most animals. The Buck and Bald wild horse herd also contains a Curly horse ancestry. Though the origin of this trait is not known, the pleasing and unique results are found in wild horses only from this geographic area. Foals in eastern Nevada are born in the spring, mostly during the months of April or May. Births are timed to coincide with spring green-up which would afford the most nutritious forage to nursing mares and foals.

Wild horses are very social creatures and are formed into what is known as a “matriarchal society.” A matriarchal society is one which is led by a dominant female. This dominant mare is responsible for daily activities of the band. Contrary to popular belief, the stud serves the band in a secondary role only. He does influence the structure of the band and is responsible for gathering up the component mares and maintaining and protecting the group, but has little to do with daily activities. Bands can range in size from two to more than twenty animals. Wild horse bands generally consist of one dominant stud, and one to several unrelated mares. Offspring either wander off or are forcibly ejected from the group before becoming reproductively mature to limit inbreeding. Young mares which leave their parental band are quickly gathered up into surrounding bands, while young studs join together into bachelor groups. Young studs will remain in bachelor herds for several years until they are mature enough to take their own mare group.